LOVE HAS GOOD MANNERS
January 14, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

Faith can give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech
December 10, 1964

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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January 14, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 2:1-11
1 Corinthians 11:23-34

"So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."
1 Corinthians 11:33 (NRSV)

In the rushed busyness of the life we live, O God, sometimes we become obsessed with our own concerns, schedules, goals, dreams. Sometimes we disregard those around us, even those closest to us. Remind us, O God, of your infinite courtesy in Jesus Christ. Startle us again with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

A friend of mine, Donald McCullough, tells a story that sounds uncomfortably familiar—to me, and perhaps to you. He was walking briskly through an airport toward the departure gate with just enough time left to purchase a newspaper and a candy bar. When he took his purchases to the cash register, the young woman behind the counter was talking animatedly on the telephone. "Great," he thought, as he handed her a ten-dollar bill. She kept right on talking, made his change, and made a mistake, gave him a few dollars less than he had coming. He got a little angry; it reminded him of the decline of courtesy everywhere in our common life and he told her so. "I'm sorry," she silently mouthed to him but continued her telephone conversation. That did it. He gave her a lecture on respect, courtesy, and manners in the public arena. Whereupon she finally lowered the receiver, put her hand over it, looked him in the eye, and said, "You listen to me. I'm talking to my elderly mother, a shut-in who lives out of town. We can talk only once a week, and she really needs me. Now you apologize to me right now. I'm waiting, mister. You tell me you're sorry."

Don apologized and slithered, he said, down the concourse to his plane, thoroughly chastened. He reflected that what he had just experienced—what he had just done—expressed unnecessary impatience, was a thoughtless eruption of anger. It was not only hurtful to another human being he did not know and would never see again, but it was part of a wider dynamic in our society, the general decline in respect, civility, and courtesy, the absence of elemental manners.

A *USA Today* feature observed that it is impossible to ignore the growing rudeness, even harshness of American life. Eighty-nine percent of us think incivility is a serious problem and it's gotten worse in the past ten years.

I told a story once that evoked more response by phone, mail, and in person than anything I have ever said from the pulpit. It was about road rage on Michigan Avenue. I was in the left lane

driving south and needed to move to the center and then the right lane in order to make the turn at Chestnut. A young woman in a BMW was in the far right lane and we both headed for the center simultaneously. I should have yielded. I didn't. I should have known better, but I accelerated aggressively and took the place. At the light, she pulled up beside me, lowered the window and seemed to want to greet me. So I lowered my window and she let me have it—a stream of obscenities. I began to get angry because she was challenging me—and only the possibility that she might be a church member prevented me from responding in kind. Instead, thanks be to God, I smiled and said something innocuous like "Have a nice day." And the light changed, and as she drove away, she gave me the ubiquitous one-finger salute.

What a way to start the day! She had used language and a gesture that were not ever used in public not so long ago, or mixed company, as we used to say. But since that happened, I have concluded that it was my fault. I started it. I didn't have to lay down the gauntlet by beating her to the spot. And that's exactly my friend's point. He regards himself as a civil, well-mannered, gentleman, to use an antiquated concept. But he stepped over the line almost unconsciously, just as I did. He—and I—participated in the lowering of courtesy and general good manners. And if we're going to complain about it, we have to clean up our own act.

It is not just etiquette. Sociologists observe the continuing decline of a sense of community, a sense of the common good, in American culture. Don McCullough thinks that the neglect of courtesy leads to the collapse of community, that the heart of courtesy is respect for persons: that it has less to do with manners than a manner of relating, a manner that acknowledges the worth of human beings. And that at the heart of discourtesy is a disrespect, a disregard—sometimes a disdain—for other human beings. (See *Say Please, Say Thank You: The Respect We Owe One Another,* Donald McCullough.)

And perhaps the way into this problem, the way to do something to reverse the decline of civility and community, is simply to remember to mind our manners.

At least that's St. Paul's approach in a letter he wrote to the tiny first-century Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth. The lectionary, which assigns texts for each Sunday, takes us to Corinth for a few weeks to ponder Paul's memorable images in the twelfth chapter, images of the church's inclusivity, its welcome to a diversity of human beings, and the wonderful image of church as a body with many members, the body of Christ, in fact. But as I read through these familiar texts this time and began to relate first-century realities to the distressing divisions across the church and in my own denomination, I found myself thinking about the material immediately preceding in that famous letter—material not often used in sermons—at least I never have. The eleventh chapter begins with, of all things, instructions on hairstyles and lengths—not an area of discourse in which I have much interest, frankly. It also contains Paul's observation—or opinion—that the husband is head of his wife, an allusion our Southern Baptist brothers and sisters have recently incorporated into their official documents—but which is not heard much around here.

And then Paul goes on to discuss head coverings—important for women, unnecessary for men; hair lengths—long is in for women, short for men—a "custom," Paul is careful to say; and then

he proceeds to address basic table manners for when the church gathers to eat together, the Lord's Supper, a weekly meal.

What in the world is going on here? Nobody is sure. Margaret Mitchell, a fine New Testament Professor at the University of Chicago, has written a scholarly analysis of 1 Corinthians and suggests that hairstyles and head coverings were based on ethnicity and maybe even party politics in that little church. Corinth was a very worldly, cosmopolitan place. There were, in that church, people from many nations and races. In addition, they had different styles of living, and to make matters worse, they differed theologically. Professor Mitchell's analysis suggests that we envision a Sunday morning worship service in which all the Republicans are proudly wearing Cubs hats and the Democrats are defiantly sporting White Sox caps. Or, as happened a few decades ago, the conservatives had crew cuts and the liberals, beards and pigtails. Head coverings and hairstyles were symptoms of deep divisions in the community, and it is that which Paul cares about. Long, short, covered, uncovered are important only because they are dividing the church.

And then, when they gather to engage in the ritual that should be the basis of their unity, instead of getting better, things get even worse. "All hell breaks loose in the Corinthian church," Frederick Buechner suggests, literally. It is a common meal: everybody contributes something—and some of the folks are elbowing their way to be first in line and eat all the good food. There is wine—and some are drinking too much and actually getting drunk. The very ritual to express their oneness has broken down and made their divisions worse. And so, Paul, like a patient parent, instructs, "Take turns." Like Robert Fulghum's unforgettable title *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,* the apostle says, "Take turns, share. My brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home."

Now at this point, anyone brought up in or exposed to twentieth-century American Protestantism cannot help but start thinking about that venerable religious institution—the potluck supper. It is almost impossible to imagine in a church with thousands of members, but with one hundred members and families it is not only manageable but often central to the life of the congregation. Garrison Keillor observed somewhere that cream of mushroom soup is the glue that holds the American Midwest together. And combined with green beans, it makes a staple potluck casserole to go along with Jell-O molds, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, scalloped potatoes, baked ham, fried chicken, and angel food cake.

In a new book, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture,* Daniel Sack analyzes the deep symbolic and theological meaning food has and points out that you can learn a lot about a church by the way it eats.

Personally, Paul's admonition to wait for one another brought to my memory the skill, strategizing, and positioning I observed many times at potluck suppers. The good food goes fast and first. Someone always brought Kentucky Fried Chicken, a real treat, and there was never any left for the minister, who went last. But I do recall seeing, out of the corner of my eye—as I was returning thanks for the meal—two little boys, my sons, surreptitiously edging their way to the table of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

In a wonderful translation of the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul's famous soliloquy on love, British New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips rendered the traditional "love is not rude" as "love has good manners."

Well, yes, it does. Don McCullough writes, "People deserve to be treated with respect, not because they have earned it, not because they are always kind or easy to get along with, but because they are part of something bigger than themselves. They partake of humanity and that means they occupy a pretty important place in the scheme of things." And C. S. Lewis: "It is with awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people" (*Say Please,* McCullough).

Love has good manners. Thirteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich said it even more eloquently and powerfully when she talked about the "infinite courtesy of God." Jesus, she said, nourishes us with himself, with the utmost courtesy. God the creator, who, in Jesus Christ, loves every creature, loves every human being as if he or she were an only child, relates to us not from power but from humble courtesy that respects our freedom. God the lover does not force or invade or coerce but allows each human being freedom to be, to choose. God the lover, who in Jesus' unforgettable gestures, opens the doors of the kingdom and holds a seat at the table for all who would come—and who, on the night of his arrest, washed the feet of his friends and his betrayer as they prepared to break bread and drink wine together—God, of infinite courtesy, invites us to that same respect and courtesy, invites us to show the world something of the reality of God, the infinite courtesy of God, in the way we relate to one another. Invites us to that same respect and courtesy toward one another and toward everyone, all God's children we encounter every day—neighbors, friends, lovers, spouses, children, strangers. Love has good manners.

Jonathon Kozol, whose books have brought the plight of inner-city schools and inner-city children to public attention, was interviewed recently by the Interfaith Alliance. Kozol, who is Jewish, has studied and interviewed and come to know and love many inner-city children, almost all African American and Christian. Sometimes the infinite courtesy of God is conveyed by the children. Kozol tells about Anthony—so sensitive that he used to notice that, at morning worship at St. Anne's School, Kozol was the only one who didn't participate in the Eucharist. He asked Mother Martha what was wrong, and she explained that Kozol was Jewish and that Jews don't take communion in Christian churches. The next time the sacrament was celebrated at St. Anne's, Kozol was sitting with Anthony and this time Anthony did not go forward for the elements. Kozol asked why, and Anthony explained that he didn't feel well. A few weeks later it happened again. Again, Kozol asked why he hadn't gone forward, and Anthony said he wasn't in the mood for bread and wine that morning.

So Kozol asked the principal, Mother Martha, about it. She explained that Anthony had come to her, concerned about Kozol not participating in the sacrament and had decided—Kozol explains—"that he would refuse to take communion so I would never be alone."

Love has good manners.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Steve Runholt, Pastoral Resident

We do greet thee, Lord, who art our sure redeemer. We greet you who meet us in so many ways—as creator, as infant, rabbi, and friend, as father, mother, and savior. We thank you for the varied calls that come to us in these encounters, these bright and startling epiphanies: calls to follow, to serve, to love, to take risks for justice, to work hard, in our own way, at turning water into wine, turning the everyday elements of our world into opportunities for people to see and know the miracle of your saving love.

In all your manifestations, God, you come to set us free. And so we pray for all who are not free. We pray for those held captive today by armies and governments, by hunger and poverty, by power and wealth. You have given us the keys to your kingdom, O God. Help us use those keys responsibly, courageously, to open, where appropriate, the doors of real prisons. To open them so that, forgiven, mothers and fathers might be returned to their children and homes and communities. Give us boldness and grace to open hearts locked in fresh pain or old hatred, minds bound by doubt or ignorance.

We thank you today for your constant call to unity in the body of Christ. We thank you especially for the visit of Cardinal Cassidy. Bless him in his efforts to promote Christian unity that your church might thereby be strengthened in its service and empowered in its witness.

We thank you for this glorious space in which we worship, for windows that glow so beautifully, for music that echoes the voice of angels, for the Word, which inspires, convicts, and transforms us. We worship in a literal sanctuary and we are glad to be here and to meet you, again and again. Send us out when we go to follow you, Lord Jesus, where you would be found. Help us touch with our lives and our time the people of our day whom you would touch — the homeless, those who are broken in body, mind, and spirit, the least, the last, the lost, the lonely. Give us energy and vision to work for your kingdom, that longed for reality for which we pray, saying together, Our Father . . .